

THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM.

"An independent government of the Natural History Museum is one of the most pressing scientific needs of the times."—*Michael Foster in 1906.*

THE government of the Natural History Museum, to which forcible attention was directed in a letter to the Press on April 19, published in last week's *NATURE*, stands in urgent need of reform. This has long been recognised by men of science, and, as the writers show in the historical appendix to their letter, the attention of the Government and of the trustees has been directed to it on several occasions in the last forty-three years. Almost every man of science of importance during that period has taken part in one attempt or another to obtain a reform of some of the more serious of the administrative defects. We notice the names of W. B. Carpenter, Charles Darwin, M. Foster, Francis Galton, Hooker, Huxley, Kelvin, Lubbock, Newton, Ramsay, Selater, Sharpey, Henry Smith, Spottiswoode, Stokes, Turner, Wallace, and all the present professors of zoology and natural history in the universities and principal colleges of the United Kingdom. Further, two Royal Commissions have reported in the same sense, that of 1850 appointed to inquire into the conduct of the museum, and that of 1870 on "Scientific Education and the Advancement of Science."

It would thus appear that for some forty-three years the whole body of scientific opinion has been the same, and has from time to time urged, speaking generally, the same measures of reform, but nothing has been done, and recently the existing arrangements have given rise to grave dissatisfaction. At the outset we desire to point out that, if we understand the letter aright, the signatories, in directing attention to this dissatisfaction, impute no shortcomings to the present working staff of the museum, but they make it clear that the present administrative methods, if persisted in, must lead to failures in the general working of the museum. At present the museum stands at the head of the natural history museums of the world, but, as the *Times* remarks, "if the present system continues it will not only be overtaken, but rapidly put in the background."

The question is a complicated one, and in our opinion cannot be properly dealt with until a full inquiry into the working of the present method of government of the museum has been made. We agree with the deputation to the Prime Minister of last July and with the present writers to the Press in thinking that a Royal Commission is demanded, partly because that is the only means by which the information required can be obtained, and partly because of the dignity and importance of the matter to be inquired into. But if a Commission is appointed we hope that the high social position and importance of the existing board of trustees will not be used to render nugatory its conclusions, as seems to have been the case with the two Royal Commissions which have already dealt with the problem. The first point that comes up for settlement is the nature and functions of the controlling body. If the trustees are retained, as we think it desirable that they should be, and in this we are again in agreement with the deputation of last July, it will clearly be necessary that their number should be reduced, and that those of them who are responsible for the Natural History Museum should be separate from those who are responsible for Bloomsbury. The magnitude and diversities of the interests involved render this reform necessary.

We are further of opinion that the trustees should be, as is largely the case at present, men of the world skilled in affairs, able to attend regularly, and

anxious to do their best for the museum, and that the scientific element, whether professional or other, should not be represented as such. This may seem a hard saying, but the reason for it becomes apparent when we consider the function of the trustees. Their powers should be defined and limited. They should not attempt to interfere in the management, because they have neither the time nor the knowledge to do so effectively. Nor should orders be given in their name, but in that of the director. It may be, and has been, replied to this that they should be reinforced and made a competent body from the "expert" point of view; but a little reflection will show that this cannot be done effectively, because it is practically impossible to find men with the requisite knowledge who can without payment give the time necessary for the proper performance of such work. If it is attempted it can only result in the establishment of an inefficient committee of management irregular in attendance (see Panizzi's evidence before the Royal Commission of 1850 on this point), and will almost certainly result in dissatisfaction among those schools of naturalists who are not represented in the management. We think it clear that the management of the museum should be carried on by the director, acting in cooperation with the senior members of his staff, and that the trustees should exercise general supervision and financial control, and act as a final court of appeal. If the trustees require expert advice other than that given by their director, it should come from a board of visitors such as exists in the case of Greenwich Observatory, and was recommended in the fourth report of the Commission on "Scientific Education and of the Advancement of Science" in 1874.

The next fundamental point which comes up for consideration is the relation between the two museums. This has been fully dealt with in the letter referred to, and we are in complete agreement with what is there said. The present arrangement, by which the director of the Natural History Museum is the official subordinate of the principal librarian at Bloomsbury, is, of course, historically intelligible, but from all other points of view is not only unintelligible but absurd. If our suggestion as to the division of the trustees into two bodies is carried out, this anomaly will naturally disappear. It is perhaps unnecessary to labour the point, but we should like to ask the Astronomer Royal or the director of the National Physical Laboratory how they would like to have to submit to the direction of a man of letters or of an antiquarian, however eminent.

A third point of great importance relates to the method of appointment of the officers and servants of the museum. The present method, by which the principal trustees appoint, the subsequent control being in the hands of the general body of trustees, stands condemned, not only by the Commission of 1874 to which we have already referred, but also by the recent lamentable occurrences as a result of which the museum has lost the services of one of the most distinguished naturalists of Europe. In our opinion it is necessary, in the interest of justice and historical accuracy, as well as of the museum, that these occurrences should be inquired into. The Prime Minister, in his reply to the deputation last July, said that he was "still unable to grasp in what way the museum failed to perform its functions." The deputation had carefully, and in our opinion rightly, avoided referring to this point and others similar to it. We admire them for their restraint, but had they done so they would have had no difficulty in convincing the Prime Minister of the radical defectiveness of the present method of government.

However, it is unnecessary for us to deal further with the anomalies of the present system. Enough has been said to show that we are in full general agreement with the views expressed in the letter to the Press of April 19, and by the deputation of last July (see NATURE, July 30 and August 6, 1908). We do not pin our faith to any particular treatment of the problem. That can only be done after a full inquiry by a Royal Commission, which we sincerely hope will be granted. The suggestions we have offered have been made more with the view of bringing out the most important of the points at issue than with that of laying down the law as to their treatment.

In saying what we have said we are deeply impressed with the great importance of the Natural History Museum to science and to education. Not only is it a most important means of scientific organisation and of research into problems which have an intimate bearing on human welfare and happiness, but, to quote the words of Sir Michael Foster in his admirable article on the museum in the *Quarterly Review* for 1906, p. 496:—

"It has other uses as well. The museum belongs to the people; it is supported by the people's money; and it is only right that some benefit to the people more direct than that yielded by abstract science should come from it. And great direct benefit can, with some little administrative care, be got from it for the people. In this dull life of ours, above all in this dull city of ours, with its murky surroundings, it is no small thing that an easy stroll, without fee, should bring the dweller in slum alley and unlovely street face to face with the countless beauties of the animal creation; and much of the animal world is beautiful even in death. It is perhaps even a greater thing that, as is clearly shown by what has been done in the past few years, the collections may be so arranged and displayed as to bring to even the careless stroller lessons not only of beauty, but also of wisdom, opening his eyes to some of the great truths of the world of life."

What nobler aims, for which to work and to sink all minor differences, than these, *the welfare of man and the happiness of the people*? Let these be our watchwords, and the evils born of misrule and ignorance shall not prevail.

NOTES.

PROF. R. MELDOLA, F.R.S., has been elected a member of the Athenæum Club under the provisions of the rule which empowers the annual election by the committee of nine persons "of distinguished eminence in science, literature, the arts, or for public services."

LIEUT. E. H. SHACKLETON will describe his recent Antarctic achievements at a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society to be held in the Albert Hall on June 24.

IN reply to a question asked by Sir Philip Magnus in the House of Commons on Monday with respect to the administration of the natural history collections of the British Museum, the Prime Minister said he is in communication with the trustees of the British Museum upon the subjects.

ON Tuesday next, May 4, Prof. Svante Arrhenius will begin a course of two lectures at the Royal Institution on "Cosmogonical Questions." These are the Tyndall lectures. The Friday evening discourse on May 7 will be delivered by Major Ronald Ross, on "The Campaign against Malaria," and on May 14 by Prof. George E. Hale, on "Solar Vortices and Magnetic Fields."

LORD AVEBURY will take the chair at the annual convocation of the Selborne Society, which will be held on

May 7 at the offices of the Civil Service Commission (Old London University). Two lectures will be given, the first on "How Birds Fly," by Mr. F. W. Headley, and the second on "How Men Fly," by Mr. T. W. K. Clarke. Mr. James Buckland, the original promoter of the Plumage Bill, will exhibit a number of lantern-slides illustrating the birds that are in danger of extermination in various parts of the world. There will also be a display of microscopes and natural-history exhibits.

THE Home Secretary has appointed a departmental committee to investigate and report on the best means of standardising with greater accuracy than at present the apparatus and materials employed in the Abel heat test for explosives, and to examine and report on any supplementary test or tests that may be submitted. The committee is constituted as follows:—Major Aston Cooper-Key, Sir Frederic L. Nathan, Captain A. P. H. Desborough, Mr. F. W. Jones, Captain M. B. Lloyd, Mr. C. O. Lundholm, and Major J. H. Mansell, R.A. The secretary of the committee is Major H. Coningham, R.A., to whom correspondence may be addressed at the Home Office.

THE Lisbon correspondent of the *Times* reports that a severe earthquake occurred in Portugal on April 23 about 5 p.m. Reports from up the Tagus show that serious damage has been done in the neighbourhood of Salvaterra, Benavente, and Samora, midway between Lisbon and Santarem. The shocks, which in Benavente extended over three hours, lasted at Lisbon from three to fifteen seconds. A Reuter message from Madrid states that earthquake shocks were registered there on April 23, and also at the towns of Valladolid, Huelva, Val de Peñas, Jerez, Villamanrique, Malaga, and other neighbouring places. The movement registered at the Ebro Observatory lasted 5h. 49m.

THE committee for the forthcoming International Aëronautical Exhibition at Frankfort-on-Main is making great efforts to ensure the success and attractiveness of the undertaking. By the middle of April the amount of the guarantee fund, 50,000*l.*, was over-subscribed, and the sum of 6500*l.* had already been promised for prize competitions. Prizes of 500*l.* each are offered (1) by Count Zeppelin for the smallest dirigible balloon which shall make at least five journeys of not less than half an hour's duration, returning to the starting point without intermediate landing, and carrying at least two men; (2) by Dr. Gans Fabrice to anyone who has made the greatest number of flights of more than five minutes' duration; (3) by Baron Krupp von Bohlen-Halbach, the conditions to be arranged by the committee. An ornithological exhibition for the representation of natural flight is being prepared by the Senckenberg Philosophical Society, with the assistance of Prof. Schillings.

AN investigating party sent out by the Government at Manila has obtained further particulars of the death of Dr. William Jones, reported in our issue of April 15. It appears that, in returning to the head-waters of the River Cagayan in order to obtain boats, he unwittingly crossed a "dead line" that had been established by a hostile tribe. He was met by a party of warriors, who offered him a dish of fish as a token of defiance, in accordance with tribal custom. Not suspecting that he was thereby accepting their challenge, he ate the fish, and was immediately attacked. He managed to fight off his assailants with his revolver until he could reach a boat, in which he escaped, but he died five hours later from his wounds. His body